

Daniel Stein

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BODIES IN TRANSITION

Queering the Comic Book Superhero

BY DANIEL STEIN

ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes the comic book superhero as a popular figure whose queerness follows as much from the logic of the comics medium and the aesthetic principles of the genre as it does from a dialectic tension between historically evolving heteronormative and queer readings. Focusing specifically on the superbodily as an overdetermined site of gendered significances, the essay traces a shift from the ostensibly straight iterations in the early years of the genre to the more recent appearance of openly queer characters. It further suggests that the struggle over the superbodily's sexual orientation and gender identity has been an essential force in the development of the genre from its inception until the present day.

The comic book superhero has been a figure of the popular imagination for eight decades, if we count Superman's appearance in *Action Comics #1* (June 1938) as the beginning of the genre. Almost as old as the genre itself are associations of the superhero with what the American amateur psychologist Gershon Legman described as »an undercurrent of homosexuality and sado-masochism«¹ in his book *Love and Death* (1949). These associations became part of the broader public discourse when the German-born psychiatrist Frederic Wertham expanded on them in *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), a flawed but popular study of the effects of comic-book reading on juveniles that played into the climate of sexual anxieties at the height of the so-called comics scare. Wertham's work is still cited in discussions of superhero sexuality, and the present essay is no exception, as I take Legman and Wertham's observations as a launching pad for an investigation of what I call the queering of the comic book superhero.

My understanding of queering the comic book superhero is deliberately ambiguous, as it enables at least two interpretations. First, it suggests a process in which a figure that had originally been considered straight by the majority of readers as well as by its producers is queered over the course of the genre's development. Second, it evokes a process of bringing to bear a queer reading on a

1 An earlier version of this essay was presented as a keynote lecture at the student conference »Made of Flesh and Blood: The Bodies of Superheroes«, organized by Lukas Etter and Maria Verena Peters (University of Siegen, Jan. 21, 2017). I thank them for the invitation and their critical feedback as well as Christopher Hansen for reading a manuscript version of this essay and for his many useful suggestions. See: Legman: *Love and Death*, p. 42. See also Heer: »Batman and Robin«.

popular serial genre that has claimed a heteronormative status throughout most of its history. I encourage both interpretations by connecting an interest in the medial and narrative specificities of superhero comics with a concern for the production and reception of queer characters and storylines. At the center of this analysis is the superhero body, which serves as the fulcrum point for thinking about the superhero as a queer figure.

As a point of departure, I take two observations from recent studies of the superhero. In *Death, Disability, and the Superhero* (2014), José Alaniz conceives of »the *super-body* as a site of elaborate, overdetermined signification«. ² I will argue that the superhero body is neither just a body nor something that is merely present on the comics page. Rather, the superbodily encapsulates a broad range of meanings, including contradictory ones, and it motivates a historically and culturally specific form of »popular body politics«. ³ Within this popular body politics, the superhero emerges as a »distinctly queer figure of twentieth-century popular culture«, ⁴ as Ramzi Fawaz proposes in *The New Mutants* (2016). ⁵ I will grapple with the question why and how the public recognition of the superhero as a queer figure has transitioned from twentieth-century attempts to subvert the mainstream reading of hypersexualized yet heteronormative body images and gendered narratives to the more pervasive (yet still controversial) current embrace of the figure's queer potentials.

1. QUEER THEORY, BODY THEORY, COMICS THEORY

My analysis of the superhero body and the queering of the comic book superhero draws on queer theory, body theory, and comics theory. I start with Eve Sedgwick's seminal definition of queer as »the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning [that appear] when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically«. ⁶ According to Sedgwick, queerness gestures beyond homosexuality to include a broader range of non-normative constructions and counter-constructions of gender and sexuality. As Alexander Doty notes accordingly, the queerness of popular narratives and artefacts is »less an essential, waiting-to-be-discovered property than the result of acts of production or reception«. ⁷ Queerness, in this sense, is always negotiated

2 Alaniz: *Death, Disability, and the Superhero*, p. 5–6.

3 Taylor: »He's Gotta Be Strong«, p. 345.

4 Fawaz: *The New Mutants*, p. 32.

5 Berlatsky claims that »Comic Books Have Always Been Gay« (2012). For surveys of gay, lesbian, and queer comics, see Sewell: »Queer Characters in Comic Strips«; Kistler: »LGBT Characters«; Hall: *No Straight Lines*; Mance: »LGBTQ Representation in Comics«.

6 Sedgwick: *Tendencies*, p. 8.

7 Doty: *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, p. xi.

and never fixed, and it is subject to constant change. Doty speaks of »various and fluctuating queer positions [that] might be occupied whenever *anyone* produces or responds to culture«. ⁸ To queer something is to disrupt seemingly stable, normative binaries like man/woman or straight/gay and, as Fawaz maintains, to create »alternative desires, [...] unexpected objects of passionate attachment, [...] and novel forms of kinship and affiliation«. ⁹ It is to question heterosexuality as the »original« sexuality, as »the true, the authentic; the norm that determines the real«, ¹⁰ and to recognize gender as a performative act. As Judith Butler has famously stated, »performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate ›act‹, but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names«. ¹¹

Perhaps the simplest yet also most potent argument proposed by body theory (as well as by Butler) is that bodies matter. As Aaron Taylor holds, body theory subscribes to a »corporeal worldview« that moves beyond the dichotomy of body and mind and recognizes the interdependency of »somatic existence« and »physical existence«. ¹² Taylor further proposed that the body »is not a stable, definitively knowable physicality, but a process«. ¹³ As such, bodies are produced and reproduced through the reiterative and citational practices and the performative acts Butler associates with the discursive production of gender and sexuality. Taking a »corporeal approach to examining popular representations of the body« therefore enables an understanding of its larger cultural functions – what Taylor calls »popular body politics« ¹⁴ – and it foregrounds the increasing significance and visibility of what Paul Petrovic labels »queer citationality«. ¹⁵

Like body theory and queer theory, comics theory is an amalgamation of perspectives from various disciplines rather than a unified approach. In many ways, it resembles the kind of »scavenger methodology« ¹⁶ of queer analysis according to Judith Halberstam, even though we have recently seen bids for the institutionalization of comics studies and the emergence of a growing canon of key theories. ¹⁷ This canon includes queer approaches, many of which do not particu-

8 Ibid, p. 3.

9 Fawaz: *The New Mutants*, p. 32.

10 Butler: »Imitation and Gender Insubordination«, p. 20.

11 Butler: *Bodies That Matter*, p. 2.

12 Taylor: »He's Gotta Be Strong«, p. 344.

13 Ibid, p. 345.

14 Ibid.

15 Petrovic: »Queer Resistance, Gender Performance, and ›Coming Out‹«, p. 70.

16 Halberstam: *Female Masculinity*, p. 13.

17 See Smith/Duncan: *Critical Approaches to Comics*; Bramlett/Cook/Meskin: *The Routledge Companion to Comics*; Smith/Duncan: *The Secret Origin of Comics Studies*.

larly emphasize a corporeal dimension.¹⁸ Those that do address questions of the body and its depiction rightly stress the medium-specificity of comics as a sequential form of visual-verbal narration. After all, comics generally narrate through a succession of framed still panels. These panels depict segments of an action, leaving it to the reader to connect them into an ongoing narrative by filling in the gaps (gutters) between panels in a process of closure.¹⁹ They thus invite a lingering gaze at the arrested moment portrayed in each panel. Superhero comics make the most of this moment by frequently depicting spectacular bodies in statuesque form, frozen in mid-motion or in various states of physical transition, as Marvel heroes like the Fantastic Four, the Incredible Hulk, the X-Men, but also villains like Spider-Man's antagonist the Sandman indicate. »Superhero bodies, despite their plasticity, are armored bodies, rigid against the chaos of surrounding disorder«,²⁰ Scott Bukatman concludes.

The superhero is thus an inherently ambiguous creature, simultaneously moving and unmoved through the interplay of stasis and sequential succession in a permanent state – an eternal in medias res – of bodily transition. This interplay shapes the transformation from Bruce Banner to Hulk (whose body bulks up and shrinks back), from Johnny Storm to the Human Torch (whose body inflames and extinguishes itself), from Sue Storm to Invisible Woman (whose body disappears and reappears), from Reed Richards to Mister Fantastic (whose body stretches and suspends at will), from Ben Grimm to the Thing (whose body never reverts back from the queered state).²¹ Such bodily transitions remain a staple of the genre, a prime example being the X-Men character Piotr Rasputin/Colossus (in the Ultimate Marvel version), who can turn his body into metal to use it as both armor and weapon. Significantly, these characters represent more than merely rigid and statuesque instantiations of the superbody. Appearing in and across panel sequences, they attain a narrative dimension that addresses their oscillation between their pre- and post-transition states, driving the action forward and contributing to an unfolding story. We can therefore conceive of the superhero as at once the static spectacle of an armored as well as armed body and a character in constant motion: as both a product and a process.

Unlike literary novels or radio plays, which can easily create characters without specifically describing their bodies, comics must, with few exceptions, portray a character's physical appearance. Indeed, they must do so again and again: from

18 See Bauer: »Comics, Graphic Narratives, and Lesbian Lives«; Chute: »The Space of Graphic Narrative«; Mance: »LGBTQ Representation in Comics«.

19 See McCloud: *Understanding Comics*, ch. 3.

20 Bukatman: *Matters of Gravity*, p. 103.

21 Characters like Superman (as an alien) and Spider-Man (as a mutated human), whose body states cannot be reversed, nevertheless transition back and forth between different roles when they exchange their civilian identity (Clark Kent, Peter Parker) for public identities as a superhero, a transition that manifests itself in the change from civilian grab into official costume.

panel to panel, from page to page, and from installment to installment, where they populate the genre with shifting bodies that eventually leave the confines of the printed page to enter into a world of transmedia representations and manifest themselves as merchandise in the wider material culture. Taylor ties the depiction of superbodies and the gender codes typical of superhero comics to this formal element:

[T]he fragmentation of the narrative caused by paneling dictates [a] splintered physicality. Heroes and villains alike are chopped up by the borders of the panels, their anatomy dissected and spread across the page. Totalities are rare. When full body shots occur, they glorify the reassembled body of the character in a magnificent, full[-]page spread. Such formal strategies of dismemberment seem to resist organic and holistic conceptions of bodies and identities. Is it any coincidence that so many superheroes are characterized by a split identity, one that operates according to the logic of a gendered binary? Coupled with its objectification by the stasis of the panels, the fractioned, passive superboddy is ripe for a multitude of reconfigurations.²²

At least the early superhero comics clearly reiterated gendered binaries through the convention of the split identity, with Clark Kent being presented as emasculated in opposition to Superman's hypermasculinity and with the «sickly Army reject» Steve Rogers becoming the almost invincible supersoldier Captain America through the infusion of a «super-serum».²³ «As Rogers's transformation from scrawny stripling to muscular powerhouse suggested, [a] particular image of ideal citizenship through scientific intervention was consistently coded as masculine and virile (not to mention white and heterosexual)«, Fawaz observes; «with rare exceptions the defining characteristic of World War II superheroes was an invulnerable male body whose physical strength functioned as a literal bulwark against threats to the nation's borders and ideological values».²⁴

Yet the figure's ripeness for a «multitude of reconfigurations»²⁵ enabled by the superhero's formally induced splintered physicality, dissected anatomy, and fractioned superboddy, cannot be fully contained by gendered binaries. Instead, it

22 Taylor: «He's Gotta Be Strong», p. 348.

23 Fawaz: *The New Mutants*, p. 8. On Superman's masculinity, see Goebel: «Rethinking the American Man». On superheroes and (gay) masculinities more generally, see Leverenz: «The Last Real Man in America»; Lendrum: «The Gay Superhero in Contemporary Mainstream Comic Books»; Lendrum: «Superhero Masculinity, Camp and Public Relations as a Textual Framework»; Best: «Domesticity, Homosociality, and Male Power»; Padva: «Dreamboys, Meatmen and Werewolves»; Palmer-Metha/Hay: «A Superhero for Gays?»; Weltzien: «Masque-ulinities»; Voelker-Morris/Voelker-Morris: «Stuck in Tights».

24 Fawaz: *The New Mutants*, p. 8.

25 Taylor: «He's Gotta Be Strong», p. 348.

produces »the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning«²⁶ that, to reiterate Sedgwick, emerge »when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically«.²⁷ The superhero body – male, female, and anything in between or neither/nor – may in some sense be passive, as Taylor suggests in the passages quoted above: there to be gazed at, to be fetishized. But this body is also invested with agency, receiving a voice through speech balloons, an inner life through (interior) monologue and dialogue, and a personal history through accumulating storylines. It further attains a life beyond the comics page through reception processes that generate competing meanings, bridge the gaps between panels, installments, and incarnations, and confront authorized versions of the superhero with multiply resonant, and sometimes dissonant, alternative visions.²⁸

Queer theory, body theory, and comics theory share an interest in dynamic models of culture and the multiple possibilities of signification in popular culture. Just as queer theory reminds us that representations of sexual identity and orientation seldom signify monolithically and are always capable of producing queer excesses of meaning, body theory conceives of the body as a mixture of physical, mental, and cultural factors that is always processual, always in flux, and never fully contained by binary ascriptions.

2. QUEERING THE SUPERHERO: POPULAR BODY POLITICS

On a very basic level, the connection between the superhero and the queer superbodily emerges from the superhero's status »as biological misfit and social outcast«.²⁹ As a biological misfit, the superhero inhabits a body that deviates from real-life bodies and may therefore queer mainstream views of gender and sexuality rooted in references to the physical body. As a social outcast who must hide or sublimate a secret (and occasionally sexual) identity and is burdened by the great responsibilities that come with superhuman powers, the superhero has the potential to queer normative notions of male and female corporeality despite its overt promotion of an idealized and hypersexualized heteronormative body. Fawaz thus invokes the concept of *queer* to reassess how the unconventional superhero body has historically »thwarted the direction of heterosexual desire [...] and cultivated an affective orientation toward otherness and difference that made so-called deviant forms of bodily expression, erotic attachment, and affiliation both desirable and ethical«.³⁰

26 Sedgwick: *Tendencies*, p. 8.

27 Ibid.

28 See Kelleter/Stein: »Autorisierungspraktiken seriellen Erzählens«.

29 Fawaz: *The New Mutants*, p. 9.

30 Ibid., p. 22.

We should note, then, that the superhero body differs from other bodies in at least three significant ways. First, it surpasses the »normal« abilities and capabilities of the human body. It possesses special powers that stem from the superhero's alien nature (Superman), its god-like status (Wonder Woman, Thor), scientific accident and genetic mutation (Spider-Man, the Fantastic Four, the Incredible Hulk, the X-Men), and biological or technical enhancement (Captain America, Iron Man). Batman is a special case, as he is (strictly seen) not a superhero but a human being, a master detective whose childhood trauma (witnessing the murder of his parents) has driven him to perfect his body and mind beyond what is believed to be humanly possible. The bodies of superheroes, however, do not merely surpass the human body; they are neither simply hyperathletic nor necessarily *überbodies* that have overcome (almost) all human limitations. As Ken Parille writes in a *Comics Journal* column on »Super-Heroes and Super-Sexism«, superhero comics also present »malformed, grotesque, and clumsy bodies« that »are built, not for action, but for posing« and that »display a physically self-destructive narcissism«. ³¹ Outrageous, gargantuan, and very unlife-like muscles, Parille suggests, may take away any overtly sexual appeal and move the superhero from an erotic fantasy to a more complex instantiation of the queer imagination. In light of such interpretations, it is not surprising that many have seen a connection between Wonder Women's garb and gay drag. ³² This connection highlights the powerful polysemy of the superhero body as at once an emblem of heteronormative hypersexualization (Wonder Woman as sex fetish), a feminist icon (Wonder Woman making the cover of *Ms. Magazine* in 1972 and 2012), and an enticement to perceive the costumed superboddy as a form of transvestism and »superdrag«. ³³

Second, superhero bodies are costumed bodies. Superhero costumes generally serve as a more or less thin disguise for the characters' essential nakedness, including primary body parts, which the costume always covers. The costumes that clad the superboddy perform distinct iconographic and ideological functions. Batman's armor becomes not only more and more militaristic over the course of the figure's movie career from 1989 onwards, but also thicker and harder, casting a protective sheen against the violent attacks of his enemies but also against an all-too corporeal reading of the superboddy. In DC's Elseworld mini-series *Kingdom Come* (1996) by Mark Waid and Alex Ross, Batman embodies »the fluid superhero body molded by plastics and steel«, ³⁴ as Aaron Taylor notes. »Although he is the most human of the trio narratively speaking (Superman is an alien, Wonder Wom-

31 Parille: »This Man, This Monster«, n. pag.

32 See Peters: »Qu(e)rying Comic Book Culture«.

33 Alaniz: Death, Disability, and the Superhero, p. 14. On Wonder Woman's gender politics, see Rhodes: »Wonder Woman and Her Disciplinary Powers«; Robinson: Wonder Women; Emad: »Reading Wonder Woman's Body«; Robbins: »Wonder Woman«; Brown: »Supermoms?«; Murray: »The Feminine Mystique«; Spieldenner: »Altered Egos«; Lepore: The Secret History of Wonder Woman; Berlatsky: Wonder Woman.

34 Taylor: »He's Gotta Be Strong«, p. 357.

an is a goddess), he is simultaneously the most *inhuman* on a corporeal level [...] [p]art animal, part machine«. ³⁵ This representation differs from the tights these characters used to wear when they started their monthly pursuits in the pages of the Golden Age comic books. Wonder Women's costume in the 2017 film version can be read along the same lines, even though, due to the reigning sexist double standard, it is much more revealing than Batman's full-body armor. For Scott Bukatman, »the secret identity constitutes the body *secretly* marked [...] but costume and logo constitute the superhero as *publicly* marked. Mask, costume, and logo are marks that guarantee the superhero body passage into the field of the symbolic«, ³⁶ where a body is no longer just a body but a seismograph of powerfully gendered fantasies.

Third, since the comics medium exerts few restraints on what an artist can show, and because of the genre's investment in fantasy, superhero bodies can virtually do anything imaginable. »[U]nconstrained by verisimilitude, the bodies represented in superhero comics are malleable, plastic, and subject to all kinds of wild reconfigurations and metamorphoses«, ³⁷ Taylor writes. Superhero comics largely function on the »conceit that *whatever can be drawn can be believed*«, ³⁸ Fawaz concurs. Beginning with Marvel's new characters of the 1960s, such as The Fantastic Four, Spider-Man, the Incredible Hulk, and the X-Men, American superheroes prominently transformed into »physically and psychologically unstable beings, their bodies seeming to switch genders through an array of anatomical metamorphoses or appearing incapable of performing the proper sexual functions of heterosexual masculinity«. ³⁹ Female superheroes of the 1960s, evoking the visual aesthetics of contemporary feminism and gay liberation, began to elude »traditional models of sex and gender« ⁴⁰ and thus demonstrated the ability of superheroines to serve as politically progressive role models in a genre associated with a conservative gender ideology.

The bodies of superheroes thus represent socially significant fantasies rather than life-like depictions. They offer a window into the imagination as well as a sense of prominent political attitudes at specific historical moments. Ironically, the growing realism of the past few decades – consider landmark publications such as Kurt Busiek and Alex Ross's *Marvels* (1994) in addition to Waid and Ross's *Kingdom Come* – has not necessarily translated into more realistic depictions of gendered bodies. It seems that superhero comics have proven to be relatively resistant to the often-voiced demands to create more life-like and less sexualized

35 Ibid.

36 Bukatman: *Matters of Gravity*, p. 54.

37 Taylor: »He's Gotta Be Strong«, p. 347–348.

38 Fawaz: *The New Mutants*, p. 17.

39 Ibid, 10. Lecker offers a queer reading of the X-Men in »»Why Can't I Be Just Like Everyone Else?««.

40 Fawaz: *The New Mutants*, p. 10.

renditions of the human body in popular culture. A recent study suggests that the exaggerated musculature of male superheroes and the bulging chests of female superheroines have become more extreme in the 2000s in comparison to earlier decades, with these and other »gender signifiers los[ing] all connection to real human bodies«. ⁴¹ While this critique of contemporary comic book superheroes is certainly on point, we can amend the notion of the superhero as a hypersexualized (and also grotesque) product of contemporary culture with an understanding of the hypersexualization of the superhero body as the result of a series of comic-book specific narrative and aesthetic practices.

Returning to Alaniz's conception of the superbodily as a site of overdetermined signification and thus a space for queering the figure of the superhero, we can link the emergence of such hypersexualized superbodies and the attending attempts to provide diverging body images to the participatory dynamics of the comic book: to the temporal overlap and mutual interdependence of production and reception. Fawaz suggests: »I see the interpretive possibilities of texts [...] as emerging within a field of dynamic interactions and antagonisms between competing actors who exercise power in different ways that ultimately shape and proliferate *multiple* meanings and interpretive possibilities around a text«. ⁴² The resulting authorization conflicts can be, and have historically been, socially and politically productive. ⁴³ They have generated political positions on a range of issues by compelling producers and receivers to enter into a discourse about the body and its sexual orientations.

Multiple meanings and interpretive possibilities emerge not just from the serial structure of superhero comics, but also from their sequential form. As Taylor reminds us:

Reading the superbodily is in many ways an attempt to understand a physiognomy that continually collapses and reforms itself from panel to panel, comic to comic, reader to reader. To a certain extent, the medium itself is conducive to unstable corporeal identities, which can be extended to the instability of gender construction and reinforcement. ⁴⁴

This implies that comics inherently queer any corporeal depiction and that they do so in at least two ways: through their narrative structure and through their ability to draw »competing actors« into a »field of dynamic interaction«. ⁴⁵ As Bukatman observes, the superbodily »is obsessively centered upon« and fosters »a corpo-

41 Avery-Natale: »An Analysis of Embodiment«, p. 73.

42 Fawaz: *The New Mutants*, p. 23.

43 See Kelleter/Stein: »Autorisierungspraktiken seriellen Erzählens«.

44 Taylor: »He's Gotta Be Strong«, p. 348.

45 Fawaz: *The New Mutants*, p. 23.

real [...] mapping of the subject into a cultural system«. ⁴⁶ The superbodily, as Alaniz puts it, »incarnates the anxieties and desires of the age«. ⁴⁷

3. NEGOTIATING SUPERHERO BODIES: LETTER COLUMNS

In order to grasp the nature of these interactive mappings and incarnations, we may turn to the letter columns that began to appear in superhero comics in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This was a time when the popular understanding of the superhero body shifted to account for the biological misfits and social outcasts of the Marvel universe within a larger U.S. »culture of corporeality«. ⁴⁸ Fawaz coins the term »bodily fluxing« ⁴⁹ to capture this shift. »Both the qualities of bodily vulnerability and gender instability constituted the postwar superhero as a figure in continual *flux*«, he writes. ⁵⁰ Fluxability is understood as »a state of material and psychic *becoming* characterized by constant transition or change that consequently orients one toward cultivating skills for *negotiating* (rather than exploiting) multiple, contradictory identities and affiliations«. ⁵¹

Such fluxability emerged as superhero comics attained a new participatory dimension through the introduction of letters pages and the ensuing discourse that brought together the perspectives of producers and consumers. ⁵² It facilitated a readerly practice that Fawaz calls »queer world-making«. ⁵³ This practice renders the superhero a site for readerly identification with the superbodily and invites them to the serial construction of the world in which this body operates. Drawing on the work of Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant, Fawaz finds queer world-making in »instances when cultural products facilitate a space of public debate where dissenting voices can reshape the production and circulation of culture and, in turn, publicize counternarratives to dominant ideologies«. ⁵⁴ It is exactly the complicity of »the aesthetic production of imaginative worlds and political practices that join creative production with social transformation«. ⁵⁵

The letter columns drew producers (mostly editors) and receivers (active readers) into a paratextual network in which they played the game of authorization, striving to exert interpretive and creative power over the past, present, and

46 Bukatman: *Matters of Gravity*, p. 49.

47 Alaniz: *Death, Disability, and the Superhero*, p. 18.

48 See Brandt: *The Culture of Corporeality*.

49 Fawaz: *The New Mutants*, p. 10, 12, 18.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

52 See Stein: »Superhero Comics and the Authorizing Functions of the Comic Book Paratext«.

53 Fawaz: *The New Mutants*, p. xvii, 14–15.

54 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

55 *Ibid.*

future of a particular character, series, and publisher's products.⁵⁶ This development was part of a larger process that involved a transition from linear, largely self-enclosed and self-contained stories, to multilinear and interlaced narratives.⁵⁷ Here, individual characters began to embody officially endorsed heteronormative identities alongside unofficially acknowledged queer histories that co-evolved in a dialectic relationship in which queer interpretations of figures like Batman authorized rather than subverted the heterosexual surface narrative of DC's ongoing productions.

My analysis focuses on the letter columns as a »serial historiography«⁵⁸ that encapsulates shifting conceptions of gender and sexual orientation. I turn to examples from the late 1980s and the early 1990s, when the original Comics Code from the 1950s was loosened, when the first major gay superheroes appeared, and when letter columns had not yet been supplanted by online communication. In reaction to a nation-wide hysteria and advocacy against comics as harmful reading matter for the young, the Comics Code Authority (founded in 1954) long regulated what comic books could show and what not: »Illicit sex relations are neither to be hinted at nor portrayed. Violent love scenes, as well as sexual abnormalities are unacceptable. [...] Sex perversion or any inference to the same is strictly forbidden«,⁵⁹ the original code mandated. It thus forbade any depiction of bodies in sexual action and any images of homosexual encounter. This enforced a binary view according to which there were socially sanctioned and illicit sexual relations, sexual normality and sexual abnormality, as well as straight and perverted sexualities.⁶⁰

The revised code of 1989 declared: »Scenes and dialogue involving adult relationships will be presented with good taste, sensitivity, and in a manner which will be considered acceptable by a mass audience. Primary human sexual characteristics will never be shown. Graphic sexual activity will never be depicted.«⁶¹ While superhero bodies had to remain largely desexualized according to these requirements, homosexual and transgender identities could now be depicted. Such new narrative possibilities, however, did not lead to an immediate and wholehearted queering of the superhero, even though DC had already included an unouted lesbian side character in the *Superman* comics, the police captain Maggie Sawyer. Marvel's mutant superhero Northstar (by Scott Lobdell/Mark Pacella), on the contrary, came out of the closet in 1992 (*Alpha Flight* #106), but he essentially served as a »good gay« and »gay redeemer« figure⁶² and remained largely asexual.

56 Stein: »Superhero Comics and the Authorizing Functions of the Comic Book Paratext«.

57 See Kelleter/Stein: »Autorisierungspraktiken seriellen Erzählens«.

58 Bolling: »The U.S. HIV/AIDS Crisis«, p. 204.

59 Qtd. in Kvaran: »SuperGay«, p. 144.

60 See Brooker: *Batman Unmasked*, ch. 2, for further contextualization.

61 Qtd. in Nyberg: *Seal of Approval*, p. 178.

62 Bolling: »The U.S. HIV/AIDS Crisis«, p. 212.

His body was implausibly muscular in typical superhero fashion. More importantly, Northstar contracted a mysterious illness that many readers associated with HIV/Aids but that was never acknowledged as such. This disease caused his body to decay, marking the homosexual body as a disease-prone vessel that registers the frailty of hypermasculine fantasies associated with the superbodily but also stereotypes the homosexual body as the heterosexual's inferior, and thus more vulnerable, Other.⁶³

Rather than focus on a single comic book or one specific superhero, I trace a discourse that unfolds across several comics, including Marvel's *Alpha Flight* (Northstar) and DC's *The Flash* (the Pied Piper), and exemplifies both the serial and the political nature of authorization conflicts. The letter columns showed controversial reactions to the implied or explicit homosexuality of these characters, even though the majority of responses were positive.⁶⁴ Typical are comments that attribute a real-world relevance to these comics, turning them into sites of overdetermined signification by demanding that the experiences of fictional characters must satisfy the demands of the genre as well as correspond to the letter writers' views of the world outside of the texts. One letter writer applauded the depiction of »gays as real people«,⁶⁵ while another maintained: »readers (as well as many artists, writers and ... editors) want to see comics reflect the real world a bit more.«⁶⁶ Another reader self-identified as gay and praised the writers and artists for creating »a character who reflects the reality of my life.«⁶⁷ Reminding comic book producers of the stake their audience had in the stories, one reader commended DC for »acknowledging the gay population and the gay comic reader.«⁶⁸ Yet other letter writers identified the introduction of gay superheroes as part of the comic's achievements, suggesting that it added »depth« to a character or created a character who »does not have a problem dealing with his sexuality.«⁶⁹ In some cases, readers demanded that the writers and artists provide more information about a character's life as a gay person,⁷⁰ yearning for complex characters whose queerness was less a burden than a source of pride. All of these statements foreground the fact that the superhero's audiences were far from ho-

63 According to De Dauw, gay characters like Wiccan and Hulkling of Marvel's *Young Avengers* series (2004–2015) »enact homonormativity as a way to gain social acceptance and reinscribe stereotypical gender roles« (»Homonormativity in Marvel's *Young Avengers*«, p. 1).

64 See Franklin: »Coming Out in Comic Books«, p. 236. The following analysis takes its examples from Franklin's corpus. For further analysis, see Bolling: »Queer Conversations«.

65 Ibid, p.228.

66 Ibid, p. 243.

67 Ibid, p. 240.

68 Ibid, p. 238.

69 Ibid, p. 226, 240.

70 See ibid, p. 230.

mogenous and that they approached these comics with different horizons of expectations.

Responses generally came from both pro- and anti-gay positions. Proponents of the anti-gay perspective complained about comics becoming »an arena for homosexual propaganda« rather than remaining a source of entertainment and about the creators »preach[ing their] view of morality«. ⁷¹ One religious reader denounced the depiction of »a homo sin lifestyle«, but the editors sided with the pro-gay perspective, advocating tolerance, diversity, and respect in order to refute the more incendiary and homophobic statements. ⁷² Pro-gay readers stressed the larger social and political significance of gay superheroes, emphasizing DC's »courage to step beyond safe and comfortable issues and storylines« and suggesting that characters like Northstar would force »straight people [...] to make room for homosexuality in their ›straight‹ morality«. ⁷³ At least a few readers criticized storylines such as *Green Arrow #5* (Dennis O'Neill, Neal Adams, Bernie Wrightson, Cory Adams; Feb. 1984) for presenting »a nice gay couple – two harmless loving men« ⁷⁴ and for missing the opportunity to thoroughly queer these characters.

A major bone of contention was the potential of the gay superhero as a role model. Pro-gay readers interpreted the role model function as important especially for young readers, some of whom would have been struggling with coming to terms with their own (homo)sexuality and all of whom could benefit from a more open-minded view of sexual difference. As one reader acknowledged, »I believe the world is in need of more open minds«, even though he dismissed Northstar because »[a] comic is supposed to tell the story of heroic people and their lives« and confessed that he could not »look up to people who can't follow the natural pattern of sexual conduct«. ⁷⁵ Branding homosexuality as unnatural relies, of course, on an essentialist binary that deems some sexual preferences natural and pathologizes others as unnatural. It further subscribes to a quasi-biological logic since the notion of »natural sexual conduct« ⁷⁶ misrecognizes the superhero as a monolithic figure, a static construct whose meanings can be fixed in a centripetal move, instead of as a polysemic and intensely malleable figure whose centrifugal tendencies have made it a central element of the global, and increasingly digitally mediated, imagination. ⁷⁷ As one reader noted, »Not all gay men are effeminate and not all lesbians are masculine«, ⁷⁸ recalling Butler's notion of gender

71 Ibid, p. 240.

72 See *ibid*, p. 241, 243.

73 *Ibid*, p. 238, 235.

74 *Ibid*, p. 232.

75 *Ibid*, p. 235.

76 *Ibid*.

77 See Stein: »Mummified Objects«.

78 Franklin: »Coming Out in Comic Books«, p. 240.

and sexuality as performative acts. Here, binary distinctions are being called into question, gender and sexual orientation are marked as performative, and a queer sense of the superbodily emerges.

4. CONCLUSION: THE QUEER CASE OF THE BATMAN

The queering of the comic book superhero has been described as a evolution development from ›implied‹ to ›actual‹⁷⁹ gay characters and ›from the perceived homosexual subtext of early superhero comics [to] the increasingly normative inclusion of gay and lesbian characters into well-known contemporary franchises such as *X-Men* and *Batman*«. ⁸⁰ A recent example of this trend is the bi-sexual mutant Rictor (Julian Richter) from Peter David's *X-Factor* run, whose initially clandestine romance with fellow superhero Shatterstar culminated in ›the first on-panel kiss between two major male superhero characters«⁸¹ (*X-Factor* #45, June 2009) in the history of the genre.

Queer superhero interpretations began in the late 1940s and 1950s with the debate about Batman and Robin's potentially homosexual relationship. Batman's associations with homosexuality persist until this day, even though the character has never been officially acknowledged as gay in his mainstream continuity. ›[T]he question of Batman's sexual identity has permeated discourse surrounding the character since the 1950s«, ⁸² Jenée Wilde notes. ⁸³ This question gained new force through Batwoman's lesbianism in DC's 52 storylines (since 2011) and the resulting tension between Batman's static (some would even say fascist) iconography as the dark knight, whose hypermasculine and hypermasculine body is increasingly enhanced by various kinds of body armor (especially in the movies), and the popular demand for a more flexible, queer superhero.

Batman may thus serve as an instructive case study and a compelling conclusion to my analysis of the queering of the comic book superhero. It is impossible to account for the rich history of Batman as a potentially queer figure, which is why I will focus on select moments in which the figure's popular body politics shifted. The story begins in the mid-1950s with Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*, which argued that comics set harmful standards for juvenile readers. One of Wertham's targets was Batman, whose relationship with his ward Dick Grayson as his sidekick Robin he singled out for criticism. As one of his major examples, he

79 Schott: ›From Fan Appropriation to Industry Re-appropriation«, p. 17.

80 Kvaran: ›SuperGay«, p. 142.

81 McKenzie: ›Peter David's ›X-Factor‹«, n. pag.

82 Wilde: ›Queer Matters in *The Dark Knight Returns*«, p. 110.

83 See also Linck: ›Batman & Robin‹ and ›Batman & Robin als ›verlässliche Referenz‹«. Scottish comics writer Grant Morrison noted to *Playboy*: ›Gayness is built into Batman. I'm not using gay in the pejorative sense, but Batman is very, very gay. There's just no denying it. Obviously as a fictional character he's intended to be heterosexual, but the basis of the whole concept is utterly gay« (qtd. in Edwards ›The Super Psyche«, n. pag.).

cites a scene from »Ten Nights of Fear!« (David Vern Reed, Sheldon Moldoff, Charles Paris, Pat Gordon; *Batman* #84, 6/1954) that depicts Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson waking up in bed together, talking about taking a shower and repairing the Batmobile. Wertham concluded that »[t]he Batman type of story may stimulate children to homosexual fantasies« because it exuded a »subtle atmosphere of homoeroticism« and presented Batman and Robin's life as »a wish dream of two homosexuals living together«. ⁸⁴ Significantly, Wertham focuses on the civilian identities and uncostumed bodies of Bruce and Dick as they are shown in an everyday situation, and not on their muscular bodies in tights when they went to work saving Gotham from harm. By downplaying the fantastic conceit of the narrative and proposing a close link between the reality of the fictional world and the reality outside of the text, he reduces the interpretive possibilities these stories offer, choosing to concentrate on one possible interpretation (offered to him by some of the comic book readers he had interviewed) at the expense of others. Yet in his analysis of Wertham's argument, Will Brooker suggests that homoerotic readings of these comics are not at all implausible if we consider Batman and Robin's close emotional bond, the presence of melodramatic plotlines in which one of them yearns for the other's safety, and the split between their public roles as crime fighters and their private lives at Wayne Manor. An earlier scene from *World's Finest* #59 (7/1952), for instance, portrayed Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson lying nude, with only a towel covering their midsections, on tanning beds. Scenes such as this enable a homosexual or homoerotic gaze and support Brooker's assertion that the two characters »can feasibly be read as ›gay‹«. ⁸⁵

DC Comics responded to Wertham's criticism and the public outcry it caused with efforts to de-homosexualize and re-heterosexualize Batman. ⁸⁶ One of the solutions may have been the introduction of Batwoman in 1956, who served as Batman's potential heterosexual love interest in order to »ward off further charges of homosexuality«. ⁸⁷ But Wertham's challenge to Batman's sexuality could not be that easily controlled, especially since Batman and Robin repeatedly thwart any heterosexual romantic advances and remain loyal only to each other. Moreover, as Brooker shows, Batman has evoked as much homophobic criticism as he has motivated queer readings. ⁸⁸ These positions create a »dialectical tension« between Batman's officially mandated »normative heterosexuality« and the many unofficial expressions of »its perceived antithesis, homosexuality«, ⁸⁹ both of

84 Wertham qtd. in Kvaran: »SuperGay«, p. 143–144.

85 Brooker: *Batman Unmasked*, p. 110.

86 See Medhurst: »Batman, Deviance and Camp«, p. 159; Lendrum: »The Gay Superhero in Contemporary Mainstream Comic Books«, p. 70.

87 Boichel: »Batman: Commodity as Myth«, p. 13; for a different take, see Brooker: *Batman Unmasked*, p. 146–147.

88 See Brooker: *Batman Unmasked*, p. 102. See also York: »All in the Family«.

89 Wilde: »Queer Matters in *The Dark Knight Returns*«, p. 111.

which facilitate the popular status of this iconic figure and ensure its ongoing purchase on audiences in and beyond the United States.

Batman and Robin's »continuing homoerotic legacy«⁹⁰ entails the ABC television series (1966–1968) starring Adam West, whose camp aesthetics and over-the-top dialogue fed into gay readings of the Batman.⁹¹ The legacy carried on into the 1980s and 1990s, when director Joel Schumacher's two Batman films (*Batman Forever*, 1995; *Batman & Robin*, 1997) played up the homoerotic angle through the infamous nipple suits, codpieces, and butt/crotch shots, much to the chagrin of many fans and commentators. Batman's alleged homosexuality had already been the subject of controversy a decade earlier, when Frank Miller reinvented the character in the four-issue miniseries and later graphic novel *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986). In an interview published after its initial publication, Miller asserted: »Batman isn't gay. His sexual urges are so drastically sublimated into crime-fighting that there's no room for any other emotional activity.«⁹² *The Dark Knight Returns* as well as the sequels *The Dark Knight Strikes Again* (2001–2002) and *The Dark Knight: Master Race* (2015–2017) envision an aged Batman of a massive build and angular stature whose physical attributes do not readily sanction any gay interpretation. In addition, Miller creates a female Robin (Carrie Kelley) to stay clear of the homoerotic legacy of his hero. Here, Batman appears as a queer figure mostly because he fails to adhere to the body ideals of his previous incarnations and of the superhero more generally. But even these aesthetic and narrative decisions cannot escape the pull of the heterosexual/homosexual dialectic, toward which Miller himself gestures when he queers the relationship between Batman and Two-Face (Harvey Dent) in *The Dark Knight Returns*: »We tumble like lovers«, Batman thinks as he battles Two-Face, suggesting »homosocial bonds«⁹³ between these two characters.

Miller's revisionary depiction of Batman sanctioned a host of other revisions and changes in the character's physical appearance – certainly too many to discuss here. In Greg Rucka and J.H. Williams III's *Batwoman: Elegy* (2009–2010), to pick a relatively recent example, Batwoman functions as an extension of Batman: as part of his proliferation into different forms and guises and as a gender-bending version of the dark knight. *Batwoman: Elegy* queers Batwoman (Kate Kane) in ways that differ from her largely conventional depiction as a lesbian superheroine in DC's 52 series by choosing a different approach to the depiction of the character's body and sexuality.⁹⁴ As Paul Petrovic maintains, *Batwoman: Elegy* not only queers its main character by foregrounding her lesbianism and her non-normative embodi-

90 Tipton: »Gender Trouble«, p. 324.

91 See Medhurst: »Batman, Deviance and Camp«.

92 Sharrett: »Batman and the Twilight of the Idols«, p. 38.

93 Wilde: »Queer Matters in *The Dark Knight Returns*«, p. 117.

94 See Petrovic: »Queer Resistance, Gender Performance, and ›Coming Out‹«, p. 67–68.

ment of femininity, but it does so by »queer[ing] comics' normative design«:⁹⁵ by expressing the »fluidity of gender«⁹⁶ through unconventional page layout and design, such as Kate Kane's frequent crossing of panel borders and the juxtaposition of different art styles.⁹⁷ Whether Petrovic is right to diagnose a wholesale desexualization and deconstruction of the hyperfeminine⁹⁸ remains open to debate, but Batwoman's physical appearance obviously deviates from the near-pornographic, scantily clad, mega-chested bodies of many other contemporary superheroines.

What can we conclude from all of this? And how can we make productive Wilde's point that »the relevant question is not whether or not Batman is gay; rather, the more interesting and important question is why comic book fans and pop culture at large insist on nailing down a sexual identity for Batman at all – be it straight, gay, or asexually repressed?«.⁹⁹ Wilde moves from a preoccupation with Batman as a text to Batman as a node in a network of serial practices: as a popular narrative whose meanings are not simply dormant, waiting to be awakened by the reader and/or critic, but as a narrative whose meanings emerge from its ability to provoke controversy and sanction multiple readings. Moreover, the assumption that Batman is neither gay nor straight nor asexual reveals a queer figure in Sedgwick's sense: as a figure uncontainable by a single, definite sexual identity.

Popular serial narratives generally work according to a dialectics of proliferation and sprawl, on the one hand, and containment and control, on the other.¹⁰⁰ These narratives must create room for alternative readings and enable divergent interpretations to maintain relevance for large and diverse audiences. Batman's popular potential is greater when his sexuality remains unresolved because this turns him from a static and monolithic character into a flexible and polymorphous – and thus an essentially queer – figure that can traverse different stories across media without being bound to a single sexual identity or body type. Reading Batman's corporeal and sexual histories through this lens, it makes sense that Nathan G. Tipton discovers an »anxiety of potentiality«¹⁰¹ in Batman's ambiguous sexual identity.¹⁰² If this anxiety were overcome, Batman would become closed-off as a site of public discourse about the body, and this would take away much of the character's accumulated complexity and much of its relevance as a site of popular

95 Ibid.

96 Ibid.

97 See *ibid.* Gilroy reads *Batwoman: Elegy* as constructing »an inherently performative, queer notion of identity and subject [...] through complex art styles and the metatextual play of narrative« (»The Epistemology of the Phone Booth«, n. pag.).

98 See Petrovic: »Queer Resistance, Gender Performance, and »Coming Out«, p. 69.

99 Wilde: »Queer Matters in *The Dark Knight Returns*«, p. 104.

100 This is a central argument in Stein: *Authorizing Superhero Comics*.

101 Tipton: »Gender Trouble«, p. 323.

102 On »queer anxieties« and processes of »narrative straightening« in the relationship of superheroes with their sidekicks, see Shyminsky: »»Gay« Sidekicks«.

body politics. If it were completely unfixed, however, Batman would become an arbitrary signifier with a reduced capability to perform the kind of popular body politics I have described.¹⁰³ In fact, the queering of the superhero, of which Batman is a particularly instructive example, is inherently connected with the workings of the inherent instabilities of serial narrative and their attending authorization conflicts.¹⁰⁴ We are dealing with a dialectic of reassurance and irritation (also of tension and release, suspense and resolution) that recalls Umberto Eco's work on serial storytelling¹⁰⁵ and directs our attention to the negotiated, flexible relationship between (homo)sexuality and seriality. Where Jeffrey S. Lang and Patrick Trimble argue that »[s]exual renunciation and serialization made it possible to move from adventure to adventure without need for normal human relationships«,¹⁰⁶ Fawaz offers a more positive view of the interconnection between superhero comics' »open-ended political projects« and their modus operandi as »open-ended serialized narratives«,¹⁰⁷ highlighting the potential for change rather than the power of the status quo and privileging queer openness over heteronormative closure.

In the early 1970s, Reinhold Reitberger and Wolfgang Fuchs noted that »[s]uper-heroes as well as supervillains seem to have absolutely nothing to show underneath their tight-fitting tights; they all appear to be poor androgynous beings – hermaphrodites who lack the primary sexual organs«. ¹⁰⁸ This conspicuous absence of sexual organs has functioned as a gap in the storytelling that triggers authorial and readerly investments with the evolving serial text, its paratextual surroundings, and its transgeneric and transmedia proliferations.¹⁰⁹ Those who want to argue that depictions of the superhero body and its sexual orientations have changed substantially over the past few decades would have to explain why this almost half-a-century-old assessment still rings true today. Of course, quite a number of superheroes have by now engaged in sexual activities, including gay and lesbian relationships. Both Marvel and DC now feature transgender charac-

103 For a related argument, see Brooker: »Hero of the Beach«. Uricchio and Pearson read Batman as »floating signifier« (»I'm not Fooled by That Cheap Disguise«, p. 182). »[T]he Batman has no primary urtext set in a specific period«, they suggest, »but has rather existed in a plethora of equally valid texts«, with the absence of an »authoritative repository« that produces »an ongoing and potentially endless stream of new texts«. If »[n]either author, nor medium, nor primary text, nor time period defines the Batman«, then »a set of key components [...] becomes the primary marker of Batman texts« (ibid, p. 185). The fluidity of these components and »[t]he very nature of the Batman's textual existence reveal [...] an impulse toward fragmentation« (ibid, p. 184).

104 See Stein: »Unzuverlässiges Erzählen in Superheldencomics«.

105 See Eco: *The Limits of Interpretation*.

106 Lang/Trimble: »Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?«, p. 162.

107 Fawaz: *The New Mutants*, p. 15, 18.

108 Qtd. in Kvaran: »SuperGay«, p. 145.

109 See Stein: »Gaps as Significant Absences«.

ters (the recurring bisexual side character Alysia Yeoh in DC's Batgirl; the superhero Chalice in Marvel's *Alters* series). So today, the superhero body can certainly be »asexual and homosexual, heterosexual and hermaphroditic«. ¹¹⁰ But its politically most potent – though certainly not always realized – potential is that it can be all of these things at once: that it can be, and perhaps always has been, queer.

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¹¹⁰ Bukatman: *Matters of Gravity*, p. 49.

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